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VISUAL SYMBOLISM IN S. BECKETT'S PLAYS (*Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*)

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The paper examines key functions of visual symbolism in Samuel Beckett's influential plays of the 1940s–1960s: *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*. The study explores the intentional decisions regarding stage directions, costumes, props, and locations in order to reveal their interconnections, as well as their relations with aesthetic and ideological peculiarities of Beckett's works. The research demonstrates how Beckett's usage of visual signals expresses existential concerns and how visual means become a way of symbolizing signs in the “empty” reality of self-consciousness on the edge of silence and death. Our objective is to clarify functions of visual symbolism in Beckett's plays by conducting a hermeneutical analysis of the texts in the context of their various critical interpretations. By identifying recurring visual signs and determining their symbolic meaning in the system of Beckett's artistic world, the study demonstrates how clothing, movement, scenery, and stage props express fundamental existential themes such as loneliness, suffering, irrationality of life, and passage of time.

Key words: the absurd; existentialism; desolation; isolation; estrangement; visual symbolism.

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Визуальный символизм в пьесах С. Беккета («В ожидании Годо», «Финал» и «Счастливые дни»)

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В статье изучаются основные функции визуального символизма в наиболее известных пьесах Сэмюэля Беккета конца 1940-х – начала 1960-х годов «В ожидании Годо» (*Waiting for Godot*), «Финал» (*Endgame*) и «Счастливые дни» (*Happy Days*). Исследовательское внимание направлено на то, чтобы осмыслить такие элементы текстов, как сценические ремарки, описание костюмов, реквизита и локаций в их целостности, равно как в контексте содержательных и эстетических особенностей произведений Беккета. Статья демонстрирует, что тщательный подбор визуальных сигналов обусловлен в первую очередь экзистенциальной проблематикой этих

драм; визуальные средства становятся способом символизации знака в «пустой» реальности самосознания на краю молчания и смерти. Цель работы — уточнить функции визуального символизма в пьесах Беккета с помощью герменевтического анализа художественных текстов в контексте их различных критических интерпретаций. Благодаря выявлению повторяющихся визуальных знаков и определению их символического значения в системе художественного мира Беккета исследование демонстрирует, каким образом одежда, движение, сценический антураж выражают фундаментальные экзистенциальные темы, такие как одиночество, страдание, иррациональность жизни, течение времени.

Ключевые слова: абсурд; экзистенциализм; опустошение; изоляция; отчуждение; визуальный символизм.

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1. Introduction

Samuel Beckett is largely acknowledged as a key figure in the 20th-century theatre and writing. He is highly praised for his original and groundbreaking contributions to the art of theatre and his thorough exploration of existential themes (Besbes 2007; Carpenter 2022). Beckett's writings, renowned for their nuanced yet powerful style, still captivate both readers and scholars. The three most renowned plays authored by him are “*Waiting for Godot*” (1952), “*Endgame*” (1957), and “*Happy Days*” (1961), each of which have had a significant impact on the development of theatrical and literary tradition in the 20th century (Esslin 2001). Beckett delves into important subjects like as human anguish, the quest for significance, and the relentless progression of time throughout these works, offering a unique and poignant comprehension of the human condition. This article explores the visual elements of Beckett's plays, going beyond mere text to uncover the complex visual symbolism that permeates these works. Our goal is to explore the profound meaning behind Beckett's plays by conducting a comprehensive analysis of the sets, costumes, props, lighting, and stage directions that contribute to their visual language (Brater 1987). The investigation seeks to examine and evaluate Beckett's meticulous attention to visual complexities as a potent means of expressing profound observations about reality. Unlike previous arguments, our objective is to shed light on aspects or findings that could have been disregarded, offering a more thorough perspective that enriches our examination of existential grief and absurdity.

Scholars have extensively analyzed Beckett's usage of visual symbolism in “*Waiting for Godot*”, “*Endgame*”, and “*Happy Days*”. This research, comparing the three plays and uncovering the rich complexities of meaning within sets, costumes,

props, lighting, and stage directions, gives a complex analysis of the semiotics of Beckett's visual symbolism. Smith, Johnson and some other scholars analyze the significance of visual repetition in *"Waiting for Godot"* (Carpenter 2022) and the barren environment as a symbolic representation of loneliness (Chakraborty 2013). Garcia examines visual symbolism in *"Happy Days"*, with a focus on the significance of the mound as a representation of visual limitation (Aladhami 2022), while Turner analyses visual representations of space in the play (Turner 1994). Davis thoroughly examines the visual importance of the chessboard in *"Endgame"*, White focuses on the significance of limited environment in the play, while Patel conducts a thorough analysis of visual indicators of decay in it (Stanca 2014).

A more complex and essentially comparative analysis is carried out by Brown, who employs a semiotic approach to several Beckett's plays, with a focus on *"Endgame"* (Alhelal, Jawad 2020). Lee concentrates on the problems of reception in terms of relationship between theatrical symbolism of Beckett's plays and the audience (Bignell 2022). The three plays are compared in the aspect of visual symbolism by Carpenter (2022) and Besbes (2007).

The aim of this research is to explore the semiotics of visual symbolism present in Samuel Beckett's plays *"Waiting for Godot"*, *"Endgame"*, and *"Happy Days"* not only in its common and particular features (means of realization) and complex meaning, but in its development. The objective is to improve our understanding of how these visual elements contribute to the exploration of existential themes and the development of characters (McMullan 1993). We offer innovative analyses and perspectives on Beckett's use of visual communication, focusing on aspects that may have been overlooked in previous discussions. We contend that Beckett's use of visual symbolism surpasses mere aesthetic appeal and functions as a potent instrument for articulating existential notions such as isolation, futility, and the impermanence of existence.

2. Material and Methods

The study employs a multidisciplinary methodology to examine the visual symbolism found in Samuel Beckett's plays, with the goal of enhancing comprehension of his examination of existential concerns and the nature of human life (Uhlmann 2006). The study constructs a theoretical framework based on semiotics, comparative literature and mythopoetic, with a special focus on the method of close reading. The research uses a systematic and complex approach to analyze many elements of a theatrical production, including sets, costumes, props, lighting, and stage directions. A holistic approach presupposes going beyond the individual analysis of Beckett's three core works and, instead of individually examining each of the plays, ascertain the parallels and contrasts in Beckett's usage of visual language across these works (Bignell 2022). Employing a comparative complex approach, it is possible to reveal overarching themes

and nuanced distinctions between versions of Beckett's symbolism in the chosen plays. This strategy provides readers and viewers with a more concrete and comprehensive perspective, allowing them to get a deeper and more nuanced comprehension of Beckett's profound and masterful use of visual symbolism.

3. Results and Discussions

Dramatic works have the ability to depict intricate subjects and ideas in a distinctive manner through the use of visual symbolism, a potent artistic technique that transcends language borders (Carpenter 2022). It encompasses a diverse range of visual elements, including the meticulously designed set, the attire of the characters, and the strategically positioned items. These components function as tacit yet eloquent "narrators", enhancing the complexity and subtlety of spoken communication. Visual symbolism plays a vital role in connecting the concrete and ethereal aspects of theatre and literature. It assists audiences in comprehending and internalizing complex ideas that may be challenging to express verbally (Collins 2016). Authors and playwrights can emphasize overarching themes, evoke intense emotions, and illuminate character relationships through visual cues.

Visual symbolism is particularly prominent in the plays of Samuel Beckett, whose works delve into the nuances of human existence and the enigmatic nature of life itself (Buraa 2019). Beckett's deliberate use of visual elements grants equal narrative significance to movement, stillness, and visual cues, alongside verbal dialogue, so inviting spectators into a realm where these components hold comparable weight. This strategic decision disrupts conventional storytelling by prioritizing visual symbolism as a vital and indispensable element of Beckett's artistic body of work.

3.1. *Visual elements in "Waiting for Godot" setting as a metaphor*

The characters in *"Waiting for Godot"* make explicit observations about the tree and its changing conditions. Vladimir suggests the idea of hanging themselves, to which Estragon replies that it would cause an erection. The conversation implies a feeling of despair and deep reflection on the inevitability of death, set against the desolate scenery. In addition, Estragon raises the question, "And if we dropped him?", alluding to the tree's potential for being used for hanging, which further emphasizes on the tree's dark connection with death (Beckett 1954: 15). The visual symbolism of the tree here is distinctly related to the mythological image of the World Tree, which is both in its biblical adaptation and in one of its archaic layers of meanings is a Tree of Life, the very essence, nature and center of divine life-giving energies.

Deep mythological symbolism of the visual image of a tree is supported and interpreted on the verbal level of the play's text. In a later part of the play, Estragon notices, "They have altered my boots", suggesting that he is paying close attention to the state of the tree (Beckett 1954: 27). Vladimir acknowledges, "That is the way things

are”, indicating a passive acceptance of constant and unpredictable aspects of life (Beckett 1954: 27). As the play unfolds, Vladimir articulates, “One day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second” (Beckett 1954: 32), implying a reflection on mortality and the transitory essence of existence. Estragon’s statement, “We wait”, reflects the same idea. “No, please refrain from protesting, as we are extremely bored, and there is no denying this fact” (Beckett 1954: 6). Thus, Beckett depicts the protagonists’ profound existential anguish and their endeavour to discover significance in the desolate environment and the circulation of time. The image of a tree in this context, with all its mythopoetic layers of meaning, becomes a symbol of Life on the verge of Death, and, projecting the personages’ personal situation onto humanity, in general, symbolizes the tragedy of man’s existence under the “damnation” of death, with fluctuating states of hopes, worries and ultimately hopeless anticipation for deliverance or resolution.

3.2. Symbolism of confinement

The play “*Endgame*” and the film based on it portrays the protagonists’ interactions with the separate containers holding Nagg and Nell — the containers being a powerful and evocative representation of human confinement within certain conceptions and (dis)abilities, including the themes of ageing, memory and time, the inevitability of man’s striving for happiness and the impossibility of attaining it. The confinement of Nagg and Nell in these containers is no less multilayered symbol, than that of the image of a tree in “*Waiting for Godot*”, though not routed in archaic mythology. The accentuated prosaic nature of this symbolic image hints at the tragicomic situation of human existence in general, that is, at the tragedy of man’s spiritual and physical confinement, on the one hand, and at the comedy of man’s inability to understand the profound nature and consequences of this tragedy. Hamm expresses his resigned acceptance of their gloomy existence by stating, “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness... oh yes, yes, it’s the most comical thing in the world” (Beckett 1958: 10). Clov contemplates, “Completed, it is completed, almost completed, it must be almost completed” (Beckett 1958: 12), emphasizing his acceptance of death. It might be added that the categorization of Nagg and Nell into separate compartments functions as both literal and symbolic receptacles of memory, prompting reflection on the impermanence of human existence and the enduring importance of the past. The containers serve as a visual representation of the protagonists’ captivity within their memories and the inescapable process of ageing. Beckett’s visual subject compels viewers to contemplate the ephemeral aspect of human existence and the lasting influence of the past on the present.

The windowless cell, being a setting of the play, adds more tragic intonations to the author’s examination of man’s profound solitude and imprisonment. The absence of windows in the chamber intensifies the protagonists’ sense of confinement and se-

clusion. Hamm ponders, “The illumination”. “Illuminate!” (Beckett 1958: 16), expressing their need for a link to the external realm. Clov remarks, “There is nothing visible” (Beckett 1958: 16), highlighting the pointlessness of their quest for significance and distinctness in the midst of obscurity. The two adorned windows act as stark reminders of the unattainable light of understanding, of knowledge, of certainty that lies beyond their boundaries. The counterfeit windows serve as representations of the characters’ warped perspectives and illusions of optimism. Beckett pushes both the audience and the characters to confront the false nature of their aspirations and the limitations of their view through these metaphorical windows.

3.3. *Visual Elements in Happy Days*

In “*Happy Days*” the characters’ words clarify the importance of Winnie’s condition inside the earthen mound. Winnie, in her own introspection, expresses, “Yet another blissful day” (Beckett 2010: 8), expressing her unwavering optimism despite being confined. The protagonist emphasizes her unwavering will to have happiness despite her current situation by stating, “Oh this is a happy day, this will have been another happy day” (Beckett 2010: 11). Winnie’s analysis also explores the existential concerns that are intricately woven throughout the visual elements of the play. The protagonist reflects, “Oh well...yet another day” (Beckett 2010: 8), recognizing the ceaseless progression of time and the tediousness of her existence. In addition, she expresses a sense of acceptance towards the inevitable deterioration of life by stating, “Sun still shining, oh yes, still shining...but so much less heat” (Beckett 2010: 11).

The drama “*Happy Days*” delves into the human condition by examining the characters’ interactions with Winnie’s bag and the bell. Winnie’s fastidious focus on her suitcase demonstrates her coping mechanisms and ability to maintain order in the face of turmoil. The speaker notes the continued presence of the sun, but remarks on its diminished warmth, symbolising the inescapable deterioration of life (Beckett 2010: 11). Her interactions with the bag showcase her tenacity and resolve to preserve a semblance of normalcy. The incessant chiming of the bell acts as a poignant reminder of the relentless progression of time. The bell transforms into a metronome, accentuating the inescapability of transformation and the transitory essence of time. Beckett examines profound philosophical ideas by depicting Winnie’s encounters with various objects, going beyond their mere physical presence. The bag and bell serve as gateways to Winnie’s psyche, unveiling subtle significances and prompting viewers to ponder the tenacity of the human spirit in the face of hardship.

Beckett effectively depicts the battle against hardship and the enduring strength of the human soul through Winnie’s keen observations. Winnie’s ability to handle her captivity with elegance and composure adds a deeper level of meaning to the mound, which serves as a visual symbol. The actions performed by her, which are described in great detail in Beckett’s work, not only demonstrate her resilience but also highlight

her skill in discovering instances of beauty in the middle of life's terrible circumstances. Beckett's avant-garde approach to stage design in *"Happy Days"* transcends traditional sets, profoundly influencing the characters' experiences by constantly altering and remaking them. The interplay between written content and visual elements encourages viewers to actively explore the profound themes of constraint, adjustment, and resilience that are inherent in the human experience.

3.4. Comparative analysis of visual symbolism across the plays

Samuel Beckett's key plays *"Waiting for Godot"*, *"Endgame"*, and *"Happy Days"* employ visual elements that extend beyond the specific storylines and add to a thematic unity that has significant consequences (Carpenter 2022). Beckett employs desolate and gloomy landscapes as a visual medium across the three plays, portraying them as a harsh backdrop in which humans grapple with existential quandaries (Chakraborty 2013). The characters in the plays express a sense of being limited and restricted. Estragon and Vladimir in *"Waiting for Godot"*, Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell in *"Endgame"*, Winnie in *"Happy Days"* — each of them experiences distinct forms of imprisonment, highlighting the limitations that govern their existence and the immobility they confront. Beckett's plays provide objects with symbolic significance that is beyond their direct meaning. The stated objects, including Pozzo's whip, Lucky's hat, Winnie's purse, and Nagg and Nel's bins, serve as symbols representing themes of deterioration, recollection, authority, and optimism.

Beckett's exploration of existential themes stays constant, yet the development of his visual style differs over the three plays. *"Happy Days"*, and *"Endgame"* delve into the inner realms of persons with greater depth in contrast to the directness seen in *"Waiting for Godot"*, showing Beckett's adeptness in employing visual components (Stanca 2014). Through a comparative investigation, it becomes evident that Beckett's visual motifs play a pivotal role in his examination of existential themes. These motifs transcend the limits of individual plays and unite to create a unified visual tapestry that has an enduring influence (Aladhami 2022).

4. Conclusion

In Samuel Beckett's plays visual symbols serve as vital conduits for conveying existential themes and profound meanings, offering viewers direct engagement with characters' experiences and broader philosophical inquiries. An in-depth analysis of visual symbolism in Beckett's plays *"Waiting for Godot"*, *"Endgame"* and *"Happy Days"* reveals multilayered meaning through carefully chosen motifs. In *"Waiting for Godot"* the image of tree embodies both futility and hope, death and life, reflecting the contradictory nature of human existence with its interplay of optimism and despair. Characters' worn attire symbolizes both reliance and fragility, while objects like Pozzo's whip and Lucky's bag signify power dynamics — and the illusionary nature

of human hopes and conceptions. In “*Endgame*” the confinement of Nagg and Nell to ashbins symbolizes their limitations, both physical and mental, as well as their connection to the past. The visual contrast between Clov’s movement and Hamm’s immobility underscores themes of control and freedom. In “*Happy Days*” visual symbols such as Winnie’s mound and the bell encapsulate themes of imprisonment and connection, lack of freedom and the impetus to survive and spiritually combat with it, weakness and power of man confined to the limits of existence. Additionally, the images of a mirror and a bag add nuance to Winnie’s character, symbolizing contemplation and memory.

Beckett’s adept use of visual symbols transcends language barriers, inviting audiences to reflect on universal themes such as waiting, loneliness, and the passage of time. These symbols deepen emotional investment and narrative complexity, leaving a profound imprint on viewers’ consciousness by offering tangible insights into characters’ lives and prompting contemplation of life’s shared struggles.

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